

ROMANS 10:8-17  
THE DNA OF THE CHRISTIAN

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single question.” Here’s today’s question: what are your hopes for the Church? Even putting these two words in the same sentence raises eyebrows in 2012 Scotland – Church, hope! The Church is a dying institution in many people’s minds; it is so divided; we have lost the battle with secular society so that we have become isolated, irrelevant, a spent force! We look back to a golden age when the Church ruled society and when communities revolved around the church. I accept that these golden days are gone, but God has not finished with us yet; His Church is still a force in the land; the Church will have a very different role in the future and a very different relationship to Scotland, perhaps. We still have work to do, a journey to make. So, what are your hopes for the Church?

Do you know the story of *The Wizard of Oz*? Dorothy is magically transported from Kansas to Oz, where she is given a pair of red shoes and told to walk the yellow brick road; Oz will be the answer to her question – how do I get back to Kansas? On the way, she gathers some friends: a scarecrow who is looking for a brain; the tin man who is looking for a heart; the cowardly lion who is looking for some courage. They travel along the road to Oz hopefully, expectantly, that the wizard will be able to give them all that they need. When they get there, they discover that the wizard is a hoax; he can’t give them what they need and so they leave disappointed, but that is not the end of the story; they are still troubled by the wicked witch and finally they overcome her and her evil power and in doing that they discover that they already have what they’re looking for. The scarecrow already is clever; the tin man already has real heart; the cowardly lion turns out to be brave and courageous after all. Dorothy even has power to return to Kansas in her red shoes! They didn’t need Oz; “what they needed was a situation that forced them to discover (or activate) that which was already in them.” (Hirsch)

Alan Hirsch is a South African, who has worked in Australia and now the USA; he writes a great deal about the mission of the Church and its future. The quote about a single question came from his book *The Forgotten Ways* which I read a few years ago. His single question is different from mine, but entirely related. He tells the story of being at a conference about 10 years ago when the speaker asked “how many Christians do you think there were in AD100?” Then he asked “how many Christians do you think there were 200 years later, AD310?” The first answer was “25,000 Christians”; and the second answer “up to 20million Christians”. Then the speaker asked “How did they do this? How did they grow from being a small movement to being the most significant religious force in the Roman Empire in two centuries?” Hirsch says “now that’s a question to start a journey!”

Before we say “it must have been so much easier for them than it is for us” here are some things to take into account about the early church:

- They were an illegal religion for all of these 200 years; at best, tolerated by Rome; at worst, persecuted. All the stories of Christians being thrown to the lions are true!
- They had no church buildings as we know them; no place to worship, no base; they met in people’s houses, often in secret.
- They didn’t have the scriptures as we know them; our Bible was only being formed during that period.

- They didn't have the kind of dedicated, full-time leadership that Churches have today
- They actually made it hard for people to join the Church, with a significant initiation process before people were able to join Church.

All the things that we would naturally look to for our future hopes for the Church – good leadership, employing more people, a good building to be redeveloped, a good relationship with the state, Government recognition – all of these might feature in our hopes for the future, but the early church had none of them and yet grew from 25,000 to 20million in 200 years. The genius behind this “lies dormant in you, me and every local church that seeks to follow Jesus faithfully in any time. We have simply forgotten how to access and trigger it.” (Hirsch)

The centre of Romans 10 is “Jesus is Lord”. DNA is all about our genetic make-up; it shapes us as we are as people; it is what makes us all the same and what makes us unique from one another. There are lots of things that we might describe as the DNA of the Christian or the Church, things that make us people that we are. *The* crucial part of that DNA is “Jesus is Lord”. This has been the most basic Christian confession of faith since the beginning of the Church; we still profess it, we still sing about Jesus as Lord; it is still the single most powerful theme of Christian faith and Christian mission. It is inside us; it so often lies dormant in Churches; we need to activate it and let it out; we need to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus Christ.

Paul talks about Jesus as Lord in two ways: first of all, as a Christian confession and secondly, as a message to proclaim.

**1. Confess that Jesus is Lord:** “*What does...*” (10:8f) It is important for Paul to remind the Christians in Rome about their confession; “this is what lives in your heart”, he says; “you don't need to look long and hard for it, because this word lives in your heart already.” Jesus is Lord and His lordship is declared at His resurrection. Jesus who died and was raised is the Saviour of the world and it is good to repeat that from time to time, to reinforce what is at the heart of the gospel. Jesus is Lord because He came into the world, suffered, died and was raised and this is our declaration of faith, this is our confession; this is what the Church believes. There is nothing new in this; there is nothing that we need to go to great lengths to be told; this is what we have known and believed since the beginning; this is the faith that lives in our hearts; we simply remind ourselves that at the heart of Christian faith stands the figure of Jesus crucified and raised and we declare that Jesus is Lord.

This creates a problem: we have to live life as if Jesus is Lord! There are all kinds of other voices that clamour for our attention; how shall we shape our lives? Shall we shape what we think and believe by what we read in the newspapers? Or by the kind of modern culture that is being widely adopted? Or by the accepted sexual and moral ethics of day? Or by the secular, atheist agenda? Or by any number of other religious viewpoints? Or, by the lordship of Jesus? The Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord; that commits us to be people shaped by Jesus. Someone said last year “we know better than Jesus!” Wow! That's some statement for a Christian to make. If we take that view, Jesus is no longer Lord when we say that, He is simply our religious adviser! We need to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus; not only to confess all over again that Jesus is Lord and believe that in our hearts, but to live that life, to have what we believe shaped by Jesus, what we think and our attitudes shaped by Jesus, what we say, the way in which we relate to one another and to other people – every aspect of life should be shaped by Jesus. Abraham Kuyper, Prime Minister of Holland over 100 years ago

amongst so many other things said: “there is not one square inch of human life over which Christ does not say “I am King”” Our task is to live that truth! There is a huge power to transform the world held by that simple attitude living inside us. The challenge for us as Christians is to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus and live that out.

**2. Proclaim Jesus as Lord.** We have a very simple message for the world. We have cluttered it with all kinds of other bits and pieces and in the midst of so many other things, that central message has got lost. If you ask anyone on the street today what is the central message of the Church is, they would either say “I don’t know!” or something like “the Church doesn’t like sex.” We have, within us, a message to transform Scotland, a power to change the world – the simple message that Jesus is Lord. Listen to Paul’s logic: “*How can...*” (10:14ff) What is that message? Do we have to invent a new message, a new slogan for 2012? No! We have a simple message, 3 words long – Jesus is Lord! We already know that message; we’ve had it since the beginning of the Church; it hasn’t changed. All we have to do is activate that message, let it loose in the community, and the nation and let the Spirit open people’s eyes to the place and importance of Jesus in the world.

Let’s turn Paul’s questions upside down to see how God works through us. First of all, we are sent: ‘go, make disciples’, said Jesus and we still have that sense of being sent by Jesus into the world, the world of our family, friends, community, city, workplace. Secondly, we tell others something of the stories of Jesus; “preaching” is simply telling someone good news, and the story is not about us and not about the Church; the story is about Jesus. Then, people hear: we have to tell the story in a way that people understand, so that they hear what we say; then the rest is out of our hands. Finally, people believe – “*Faith...*” (10:17) It is not automatic; not everyone who hears will believe; but no-one will believe without hearing! God works in the world when His people tell others the story of Jesus; this is His chosen method of making new disciples, when His Church tells the world that Jesus is Lord. Let us rediscover the place and importance of Jesus and share Him with someone else.

Things are very complicated for the Church and Christians in Scotland today. In the Church of Scotland we have a Theological Commission due to report in 2013 to help the Church bring its soul-searching about same-sex relationships to a conclusion. There is a National Stewardship programme to help deal with some huge financial issues that face the Church. The Government’s consultation on same-sex marriage is due to be published sometime this year, and that may well be a defining moment in the relationship between the Church and the Government? What will all of this mean? How will these factors impact on the question that we asked at start: “What are your hopes for the Church?” Our DNA makes us the people that we are; the Church’s DNA shapes the Church; there are some very simple things that make up the Church’s DNA and over March we are going to look at few more of them. The most basic, the simplest, the most important strand of our Christian DNA is “Jesus is Lord”. In the midst of all this complicated stuff, all the unanswered questions, all the hopes and doubts, the first and most important thing we must do is this: to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus. We know this; it is in our hearts. Let us confess it confidently and boldly; let us live as if Jesus is Lord; let us tell others that Jesus is Lord. This is the message that transformed the world 2000 years ago; it will do the same today if we let it!